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Comparative Book Review: The Roles and Burdens of the American Empire and Implications for Military Strategy

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Comparative Book Review: The Roles and Burdens of the American Empire and Implications for Military Strategy

"For many Americans, "empire" remains a dirty word, alien to our preferred self-image."
Andrew J. Bacevich, "We have the power. Now, how do we use it?"
Washington Post op-ed, April 20, 2003, p. B3

Introduction

In recent months, much has been written and discussed about the emergence/resurgence of the American empire. Other terms used for "empire" include sole superpower, hyperpower, or global hegemon. By early 2003, with the United States securing likely military success in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States faced no single rival or group of opponents that could come anywhere near to matching the level of U.S. military capabilities. Moreover, in the case of Iraq, the United States acted without explicit U.N. authorization and thereby appeared to expand its own freedom of action. These events, however, have left open many questions about whether the dominance of U.S. power provides for greater U.S. security or the pursuit of other vital U.S. interests.

It is important to note that the debate over the U.S. "imperium" is not a new one. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 eliminated the U.S.' superpower enemy and reconfigured the Cold War bipolar global order. However, discussion of the U.S. "empire" in the early 1990s focused on decline and the rise of new potential rivals, perhaps reflecting U.S. economic struggles at the time and the uncertainties of the post-Cold War era. Conflict and instability in Africa, the Balkans, and Central America pointed to potential U.S. "burdens" rather than opportunities for the United States to act like an imperial power.

The tragedy of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States became a catalyst for the United States to use its unparalleled strength to defend its security against terrorism. Debate persists as to whether the open-ended U.S. global war on terrorism, and all of the military strength and freedom of action the United States brings to bear, constitute U.S. imperial ambitions.

Two recent books – one written prior to September 11, 2001, and the other published in 2002 – address the concept of the United States as an empire, although they differ in their approaches and conclusions. This report first discusses the earlier work (from 2000), *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today*, by Donald Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, and then *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy*, by Andrew J. Bacevich. For each, primary conclusions are analyzed, followed by some alternative perspectives and conclusions.

While America Sleeps – Analysis of Primary Themes

Kagan and Kagan's opening salvo, "America is in danger," reads like a disconcertingly accurate horoscope delivered more than a year before September 11, 2001. Without predicting exactly what kind of attack would befall the United States, the authors clearly hoped to provide early warning against potential harm to the country and to sound the alarm about complacency in national security affairs. General public opinion at the time of the book's writing, however, foresaw no such dramatic threat on the horizon.

In the preface, the authors explain that their book's title refers to a student senior thesis written by a young John F. Kennedy (entitled "Why England Slept") that discussed Britain's lack of preparedness for World War II. Beyond the title, Kagan and Kagan draw numerous parallels

between Britain's interwar experience and the United States at the start of the 21st century.[1] They even refer to the U.S. situation in 2000 as "the interwar years," a characterization that may now gain currency as the period between the Cold War and the global war on terrorism that began after September 11, 2001.

While the authors acknowledge that the analogy between Britain post-World War I and the United States post-Cold War is not an exact one, they come to three primary conclusions about both historical periods. The first is that the burden of global leadership clearly belonged to each power in its respective time. Kagan and Kagan assert that only Britain could have taken the lead in shaping a new global order after World War I. Domestic political priorities, however, brought about a swift demobilization and restricted resources for the British military. As a result, Britain's expansive and imperial foreign policies became increasingly mismatched with its military capabilities. This divergence negatively affected British responses to a series of crises in the British empire in the 1920s, and would eventually undermine an earlier or more robust response to the rise of Nazi Germany.

Kagan and Kagan argue that the United States likewise was destined to lead in the modern era. After World War II, U.S. leaders accepted the burden of preserving the peace by shaping a new world order and committing U.S. efforts and resources to maintain the global system indefinitely. The authors find that the United States lacked this commitment at the end of the Cold War, even though they argue that only the United States could have shaped the post-Cold

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[1] Unlike other studies (for example, see Michiko Kakutani, review of *The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons of Global Power*, by Niall Ferguson, *New York Times* (April 18, 2003): E38), Kagan and Kagan do not compare the general characteristics of the British empire with the United States, but rather focus on how each responded after the end of a great conflict (World War I and the Cold War, respectively).

War international order. Instead, they argue that the United States maintained a Cold War mindset and did not grapple with larger global responsibilities.

A second theme expressed in the Kagan and Kagan book is the value of military preparedness. Both the demobilization of the British armed forces after World War I and the U.S. demands for a "peace dividend" in the 1990s led to disastrous states of military readiness, according to the authors. They further argue that public complacency about security matters exacerbated military deficiencies. For Britain, the 1925 Locarno Treaty fostered false hopes for peace and the preservation of the status quo in Europe. For the United States in the 1990s, the break-up of the Soviet Union reduced the rationale for Cold War military structures and doctrine, but did not inspire U.S. thinking on new security challenges. Interestingly, in their message about military preparedness, the authors do not specify the nature or origin of the new security threats to the United States. Nevertheless, they feel the need to admonish Americans to "wake up," since inadequately prepared or resourced military forces can cripple a nation's will to combat security challenges.[2]

A third theme that Kagan and Kagan raise throughout their comparison of Britain and the United States is the pernicious effect of military weakness on one's current or future enemies. For example, Britain's rapid demobilization after World War I and pattern of wishful thinking in foreign policy may have emboldened Hitler to take increasingly aggressive and provocative actions in the 1920s and 1930s. Not only did Britain's policies fail to deter Germany, but they also left British military unprepared to deal with the growing German threat. Similarly, Kagan and Kagan assert that U.S. military weakness and confusion in foreign and defense policy in the

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[2] Donald Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, *While America Sleeps: Self-Delusion, Military Weakness, and the Threat to Peace Today* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 426.

1990s only encouraged the emergence of hostile states and actors.[3] Among other examples, the authors point to the inconclusive ending to the 1991 Persian Gulf war and persistent domestic political demands for a "peace dividend" after the Cold War as key demonstrations of U.S. military weakness.

American Empire – Analysis of Primary Themes

Andrew Bacevich approaches the subject of American empire from a somewhat different perspective. His starting point is that the United States is unquestionably a global hegemon, whether or not Americans want to acknowledge their nation as such. He claims that the United States maintains a "transcendent" mission and global status that is largely accepted by the rest of the world.[4] Where people disagree is on the question of how the United States should use its power and status to meet national objectives. In other words, Bacevich writes, uncertainty surrounds the issue of U.S. grand strategy.

Bacevich's primary thesis is that the United States does indeed have a well-defined grand national strategy. Moreover, he asserts that this strategy has remained largely unchanged in spite of dramatic shifts in the international system over the years, including the end of the Cold War and the recent intensive focus on the terrorist threat. His argument is that the underlying core U.S. goal has remained the preservation and expansion of the American imperium through a strategy of global openness. The primary U.S. role under this strategy is to guarantee and enforce the international system of openness. The phenomenon of globalization, driven by U.S.

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[3] Kagan and Kagan, 1.

[4] Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 1.

power and influence, is a primary example of how this strategy has manifest itself in the post-Cold War era.

After presenting his take on the U.S. grand strategy of openness, Bacevich spends much of the book discussing how U.S. policy in the 1990s, especially military policy, failed to meet the demands of U.S. national strategy, resulting in a "strategy-force mismatch."[5] Whereas successive Administrations called for bold military reforms to fulfill the openness strategy – including catch phrases and studies such as "transformation," military supremacy, and the Joint Vision 2010 – Bacevich argues that little was achieved from these efforts. As a result, he writes, "after a decade of so-called transformation, [the military establishment] in 2000 was organizationally all but indistinguishable from the military establishment of 1950."[6] Efforts to reconfigure the armed forces to meet the challenges of the globalization age remained largely unfulfilled, he asserts.

Bacevich argues that continuity in strategic thought prevailed on the policy front as well. His view is that the end of the Cold War did not affect four key U.S. imperatives: to promote openness and integration, maintain military supremacy, maintain U.S. global reach, and take on the mission to transform the global order and thereby perpetuate U.S. dominance.[7] In other words, the underlying goal to preserve and advance openness was enduring enough to persist after the end of the bipolar order.

Bacevich also sees strategic continuity after September 11 and argues that the essentials of U.S. policy have not changed following the terrorist attacks. "If anything," he writes, "al-

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[5] Bacevich, 139.

[6] Bacevich, 137.

[7] Bacevich, 213.

Qaeda's attack on the American homeland eased constraints that during the previous decade had inhibited U.S. officials in their pursuit of greater openness (and expanded American hegemony).[8] Instead of adopting a new strategy, the Bush Administration seized the opportunity created by September 11 to pursue its pre-existing aims in a far more aggressive manner. The global war on terrorism, waged rhetorically as a defense of freedom, can therefore be seen as a continuation of the great American project to expand openness and promote global integration.[9]

Counterpoint and Conclusions

Both the Kagan and Kagan book and the Bacevich book have their strengths and weaknesses. For example, it is certainly striking to read the sense of urgency and warning in the Kagan and Kagan book, which pre-dates the September 11 tragedy. Their case for the necessity of global leadership after major war, and the call for *some* country to bear this responsibility, is also compelling. However, in their analysis of current U.S. strategy, one could argue that the authors place too great an emphasis on the deterrent value of military strength. Peer competitors to the United States may arise for reasons other than perceived U.S. military weakness, just as Hitler may have come to power in Germany no matter what the state of the British military was or what actions Britain took immediately after World War I. Indeed, overwhelming U.S. military power might breed greater resentment among potential enemies, especially terrorists, who anyway are not likely to be responsive to deterrence. The Kagan authors also place little or no value in U.S. engagement or transformative strategies, either in the past (eg, détente in the 1970s) or at present. Their view seems to be that, at best, these sorts of policies might promote

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[8] Bacevich, 227.

[9] Bacevich, 232.

"wishful thinking" and complacency over vigilance; worse, such policies might be viewed by enemies of the United States as signs of weakness and a lack of resolve.

Bacevich's thesis of U.S. strategic constancy over shifting eras is an interesting one. On the one hand, it is hard to argue with his characterization of the core U.S. goals of openness and integration, even if he appears to give extremely limited treatment to the strategies of containment during the Cold War, or the complexities of the current war on terrorism. On the other hand, his emphasis is mostly on the goals, or ends, or U.S. strategy. The author does not elaborate much on the means and especially the ways the United States might go about implementing a strategy of openness, nor does he provide many suggestions on how the U.S. military might better achieve "transformation" in support of openness. I also found it surprising that Bacevich did not touch upon concepts of homeland defense or homeland security in his treatment of September 11 and its aftermath.

Both sets of authors might easily agree that the United States should be considered an empire. At the same time, both might also agree that the United States today does not resemble empires of the past. Certainly, U.S. officials reject the empire characterization, and point to U.S. anti-imperialist traditions and the absence of U.S. territorial ambitions. And while U.S. military dominance might resemble the military might of past imperial powers, the U.S. emphasis on freedom, democracy, and open markets might well be unique in history.

However, being an empire also means bearing the responsibility of promoting, enforcing, and defending the global order. Here there seems to be far less consensus on what this may mean for the United States generally, and the U.S. military and national security establishment in particular. How many challenges to the world order can the United States confront? How many should be confronted using the military instrument? How far does the U.S. imperative of

providing security for itself extend beyond U.S. borders? Will the U.S. commitment to transform rogue or uncooperative states endure until the desired end-states are achieved? Can the United States sustain the costs of these commitments? These and other questions will likely linger in the minds of strategists as the ramifications of the current-day American empire unfold. As some other authors and commentators have point out,[10] it is also likely that these questions may promote a revived debate over the risk of imperial over-extention or overreach for the United States in the future.

[10] For example, see Michael Ignatieff, "The Burden," *New York Times Magazine*, January 5, 2003.

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